

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.



a 521
R 44A2

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
National Program Staff
Agricultural Research Service
Washington, D.C. 20250

CA-H-13
February 1975

CONTROLLING HUMAN LICE

3

Three kinds of lice attack man--the body louse, the head louse, and the crab or pubic louse. These lice are world-wide in their distribution and all are found in the United States.

From a medical viewpoint, the body louse is most important because it serves as a vector of epidemic typhus, trench fever, and relapsing fever. Louse-borne diseases are extremely rare in the United States and it causes less domestic concern than do head and crab lice. Head lice have been proved capable of transmitting typhus under experimental conditions and are also important from a health standpoint. Crab lice are not known to transmit disease.

The head louse and the body louse are similar in appearance; they are distinguished only by their location on the host. An adult body louse is grayish in color and about one-fourth inch long. The nymphs are smaller but even newly hatched nymphs are visible to the naked eye. A crab louse is shorter and much flatter and broader than a body louse. Its crablike shape accounts for its common name.

The eggs of human lice are all similar in appearance. They are whitish colored and are often more noticeable than the lice. The presence of eggs is frequently used as an index of infestation when examinations are made by doctors and nurses.

The life cycles of all three kinds of lice are similar. Ordinarily, eggs hatch in about 8 days after they are laid on the human body. However, eggs removed from the body develop more slowly because of the lower temperature and incubation sometimes takes 2 weeks. Head and body lice spend about 9 days in the nymph stage, shedding their skin three times as they grow to adults. Crab lice grow more slowly.

Female lice begin laying eggs about 1 day after they become adults. A female louse may live as long as a month, laying four or five eggs a day.

Immature lice usually stay close to the skin where they suck blood but mature lice frequently wander around on the clothing and return to the skin only when hungry. This habit of the lice causes a rapid spread of infestations when people are physically close together in places such as schools or public conveyances.

Body Lice

The body louse lives in the clothing and visits the skin several times daily to feed. The undergarments are most heavily infested but some lice can usually be found in the outer clothing. Ordinarily, the eggs are deposited in seams and folds of the clothing. Usually, the eggs are glued to fibers of the cloth but sometimes they are fastened to hairs on the body.

Persistent infestations by body lice are always the result of poor sanitation. These lice are best controlled by changing to clean clothing at least once a week. Either washing in hot water or dry cleaning infested garments kills all stages of lice. Because body lice live on the clothing instead of the body, they are easier to control than head and crab lice.

Head Lice

The use of insecticides is essential for the control of head lice because they can withstand frequent shampooing with soap and water. It is almost impossible to remove lice and eggs by combing and brushing the hair.

Crab Lice

Sanitation is much less important in the control of crab lice than it is for body lice. Crab lice live on the hairs of the body instead of on the clothing. Therefore, it is necessary to use insecticides because disinfection of garments will not free the person of lice.

Louse Remedies

One product that was tested by the USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS) contains an insecticide and is available over the counter. It contains a combination of pyrethrins, piperonyl butoxide, and deodorized kerosene. Some other materials available only on prescription consist of shampoos, creams, or lotions containing lindane, and a lotion containing a combination of benzyl benzoate, benzocaine, and DDT. This medical use of DDT is not affected by the ban on most uses of DDT.

The lotion containing benzyl benzoate, benzocaine, and DDT gave best results in ARS tests. It killed both the eggs and the lice and the ingredients relieved itching more effectively than some materials. Some other treatments may also be prescribed by physicians.

Precaution

After handling an insecticide, do not eat, drink, or smoke until you have washed. In case an insecticide is swallowed or gets in the eyes, follow the first-aid treatment given on the label and get prompt medical attention. Dispose of empty insecticide containers by wrapping them in paper and placing them in your trash can.